

**Idaho Falls District Bureau of Land Management
Resource Advisory Council Meeting
September 7/8, 2005
Salmon, Idaho**

Attending Members: Jim Hawkins, Doug Hancey, Eric Tilman, Ben O'Neal, Garth Taylor, Rick Snyder, Kent Christensen, and Dino Lowrey (No Quorum). Other BLM members attending: Joe Kraayenbrink (BLM District Manager), David Howell (BLM Public Affairs Specialist), Scott Feldhaussen/Salmon Office, Dave Rosenkrance/Challis Office. Apologies to other BLM staff who attended, but whose names were missed.

The meeting began with a welcome by facilitator David Howell and this was followed by a head count for a cook-out dinner provided by a local group, Rawhide Outfitters.

RAC members were provided with a brief "sage grouse strategy update": the Draft State Plan is on its way. The internal review is scheduled for the month of September, with possible release as a public draft slated for as early as October 25th. If that schedule holds, comments from the public (and the RAC) would be due by December 13, 2005. RAC member Kent Christensen passed out a "Grouse Partnership" newsletter from the North American Grouse Council, a group committed to grouse protection through conservation and stewardship of critical habitat. A range management newsletter was also distributed. The newsletter focuses on the change in global atmospheric chemistry, climate, and global water resources (i.e., availability and quality), and how this affects rangeland management. It was stated in the newsletter, "the number one challenge in managing arid and semi-arid rangelands is to avoid degradation. This requires that planning, decision making and implementation focus on rapid management responses to relatively subtle changes in the environment, and that monitoring systems are currently inadequate to identify thresholds as triggers for rapid, decisive action".

Rita Dixon of Idaho Fish and Game stated that the Idaho Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy is out in draft form on the Fish and Game website (<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>.) Doug Hancey passed out a hard copy of the table of contents and RAC members were encouraged to review the document.

The next RAC meeting dates were set for the 29th and 30th of November, just after Thanksgiving, in Idaho Falls. Because newly appointed RAC members will be attending, the morning session on the 29th may be set aside for a new member orientation, with other "seasoned" members joining them after lunch (exact times to-be-determined). New officers will be elected at this time, so a full quorum is needed.

District Manager Joe Kraayenbrink provided the RAC with an update on pertinent issues from his perspective.

On a sad note, there will be personnel changes in the Salmon District as their long-time Field Manager, Dave Krosting, passed away in August. Assistant Field Manager Craig Nemeth and staff member Dick Buster will fill that void. Carol McCoy-Brown left her position as Field Manager (Idaho Falls office) to accept a position with the Forest Service in Cascade, Idaho. Karen Rice is the interim Field Manager while Wendy Reynolds, currently with the BLM in Burley, is slated to fill that position.

Fire Update: From a BLM standpoint, this is the third year in a row with few fires in the Idaho Falls District. This past weekend, the Fort Hall Reservation had two fires burning, with 500 people camped out and engaged in suppression. Both fires at this time are approximately 10,000 acres, and one was human-caused, the other caused by lightening. In Salmon, the air was thick from smoke from numerous fires in the Frank Church Wilderness, in fact, 27 fires were burning in the Middle Fork corridor on the 7th.

There was no current movement to report on Western Watersheds lawsuit (assigned to Chief Judge B. Lynn Winmill) against the BLM over changes in grazing regulations. The BLM will prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) on proposed changes to grazing regulations affecting over 160,000,000 acres of western public lands permitted for livestock grazing.

Budget: The appropriations passed approximately two months ago, and the numbers will be about the same as last year, but this means that many programs will be stagnant or declining (many citizens and BLM staff members are worried about funding for noxious weed programs). Several staff members were laid off last year, and the hiring of a few temporary employees for range monitoring is a goal for the Upper Snake River District (perhaps two per field office).

A General Management Evaluation occurred in the Upper Snake River BLM recently, with a four-person team interviewing management and staff, reviewing internal processes, and generally assessing the state of the health of the BLM unit. A few minor tweaks were identified in order to make things better, but overall, the unit received an excellent review.

Other Issues in the District:

- EA's for grazing permits
- L&W Stone litigation, on-going
- Ditches and Diversions-attempting to reconnect stream segments for fish recovery
- Planning, no new land use starts
- SF Snake and Pocatello Management Plans (progress dependent on funding)
- Boulder-White Cloud Initiative: Simpson will have a hearing in October-moving cautiously (it's a balancing act)
- Phosphate industry (Pocatello), two EIS's being developed, there are water quality issues as selenium has killed off many sheep in the past. Voluntary responsibility pact still falls under CERCLA. Currently conducting environmental studies to see what the "real" versus the "perceived" issues are.

RAC member Garth Taylor asked the question, “If a district doesn’t have to fight many fires, does that open up the budget? In other words, is that money allocated only for fire fighting or could it be used for noxious weed control or OHV programs? Joe Kraayenbrink explained that it’s a pot of money that all BLM Districts can draw off on, but only for fires, and since it is task specific, it cannot be transferred to other programs.

Jim Hawkins initiated a discussion on the status of OHV regulations in Idaho, and it was noted that Challis and Salmon have proposed some OHV trails, but the rest of the state is spotty. There is not much money in the budget to manage trails, and compliance is always an issue because you can’t put a ranger at every fence post. The Challis and Salmon field offices hope to get help from the OHV specialists in Boise, and perhaps the Boulder-White Cloud initiative will provide some funding to assist with trail designations. The entire state is in need of a designated route system, but the manpower is not available to work on this as of yet. The public would like to see existing routes mapped so they know where to go. It was mentioned that the Forest Service also needs to be at the table when OHV decisions are made.

Jim Hawkins wanted to know where the “noxious” weed-free hay issue was going, if the process had stalled out or if a ruling had been finalized.

Kent Christensen provided input on the leafy spurge issue, and mentioned that this noxious weed in the Spencer and Medicine Lodge area is bug controlled, but it will take at least six years to see the impact. He admonished, biological control takes patience and it is not a new practice (it was initiated across the United States in the 1980s), and use of insects is just one of the tools in the bag (i.e., sheep and goat grazing are also used to control noxious weeds in some areas, especially along waterways where chemical control is restricted). Fires hurts beneficial insects such as the flea beetle (*Aphthona sp.*), and can set programs back significantly.

Scott Feldhausen (Salmon Field Office) then led the RAC members to the Sacajawea Center. He introduced Linda Clark (BLM Resource Management Specialist) and mentioned that BLM involvement in the interpretation center is, and will continue to be, substantial. Linda Clark informed us that 87 acres of the center is owned by the City of Salmon, but the city has worked with the BLM for over 5 years preparing for the center. It is also expected that the Forest Service will be joining in the partnership. The center utilizes volunteer docents and environmental education is the primary (long-term) goal of the center since the “Lewis and Clark” fanfare is expected to be a rather short-lived phenomena. The center is the site for many public events (such as Dutch oven cooking, dances, music, art shows and various demonstrations) and helps to build community relations. The center is part of a green belt that is utilized for cross-country skiing in the winter. Volunteer staff supports the local school system in teaching about the importance of the environment.

Center staff member Terry Whittier, who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge about Lewis and Clark, led us on a tour of the interpretive exhibits along the walking trail. He again stressed the importance of creating an awareness of environmental issues

via the displays, such as establishing healthy habitat along riverbanks, what plants are (and were available) and the uses of these plants, protecting cultural resources, and making people aware of noxious weed issue.

At one of the first exhibits, Whittier asked the group, “How did Lewis and Clark know they were in a western drainage without benefit of any maps?” The answer was, by the presence of salmon in the streams, since salmon did not occur over the divide. Terry then broke down what happened to Lewis and Clack in this area by describing “Four Parties”: the Advance Party, Reconnaissance Party, Portage Party, and finally the Depart Party. In other words, they came, they saw, they attempted to navigate part of the Main Salmon, but after a few portages (and swims), they departed for higher mountain passes. Terry also discussed the Upper Salmon Watershed Project: a partnership to promote and prioritize steelhead and salmon recovery. Project members are specifically looking at which fish streams can be improved, how to increase flows, which hydraulic flow systems are best, and they are working with landowners to fence spawn habitat. Habitat improvement and restoration is a priority, it is important to get flows into now isolated stream segments and reconnect segments to make a continuous system. The fire exhibit addressed the reality of fire (and its necessity) and the perceived role of fire. RAC members also visited fish weirs and the Broadbent ranch house/homestead.

Chris Tambe, BLM Range Technician and weed coordinator, mentioned again that noxious weeds are a serious problem in this area and they have 4 seasonal employees addressing the issue and have an integrated weed management program (i.e., they use a variety of tools to knock weeds back). The biggest challenge acknowledged was in “keeping weed free areas” just that, weed free. We learned that 2 track roads, trucks and other vehicles introduced more weeds than animals

Phil Barbarick (BLM Physical Scientist) provided an overview on one of the water quality-mining reclamation projects in the area. In the Salmon Field Office, they typically tackle one water quality project per year, and then begin the NEPA paperwork for the next project (obviously, these projects are dependent upon level of funding). The mining site we visited is adjacent to Canyon Creek (a perennial tributary to the Lemhi River) on a low flank of the Beaverhead Mountains. The road next to project traverses Bannock Pass, and was once a historic wagon road that led to several Montana mines. Virtually all of the mining in Idaho from 1860 to 1864 was placer mining, and streams, no matter how small, were often dammed and diverted to the claim. This mine had a mill, and 9,000 yards of tailings, which contained up to 35% lead in some places, fanned out onto the Canyon Creek flood plain.

Why was this site identified as a priority?

- 1) Because of its proximity to recreational sites and,
- 2) Because when Canyon Creek was reconnected to the Lemhi, water quality became a larger issue due to the high levels of lead in the tailings (The stream had been disconnected from the Lemhi for the last 100 years and the BLM has worked with the landowner to ensure that 2 cfs at least will flow year round).

In order to attempt to keep this portion of the stream in its channel, and in order to promote fish passage, a large culvert was recently installed which replaced a smaller culvert that was a fish barrier. We were informed that a Special Appropriation from the Northwest Fish Passage legislation provided funding for this culvert and four others, with each culvert running from 50-100k. Salmon smolt are now found in the lower end of the creek and there is a healthy population of cut throat in the drainage.

To mitigate the tailing problem, 14,800 cubic yards of tailings were walled back against the hill, away from the stream bank, and compacted (dust suppression was an integral part of the process), and then seeding occurred to help stabilize the surface. Weed free straw, blue bunch, and Siberian wheat grass made up the bulk of the cover, and monitoring for weeds turned up only seven specimens. North Wind was the sub-contractor and it took 220k for the entire project and only 6 weeks to complete (i.e., a very efficient process). There are five more large sites like the Canyon Creek mine that need to be reclaimed in the Salmon District, and many smaller sites similar in nature need to be closed. Some of the challenges with closures are keeping “tourists” away from historic mines (to “sign” or “not to sign”, that is a big question), as the old shafts are dangerous, and tourists, like nature, abhor a void. Also, ground water movement and infiltration can vary, making it difficult to predict where future lead levels might be high and which areas may require reclamation or mitigation measures.

Vince Guyer (BLM Natural Resource Specialist) gave a brief presentation on the Pygmy Rabbit Program. Pygmy rabbits are a BLM Sensitive Species (Type 2), and although they occur throughout most of the Great Basin, their distribution and population trends are largely unknown. We visited the study site of Cedar Gulch where two studies have been concurrently conducted over the last three years (funding = 100k for the student researchers over this time period). The first study is concerned with how far the adult rabbits move and where the burrows are located. (Usually the burrows are found in the taller and denser sagebrush, although in east-central Idaho, the rabbits occupy “mima mounds” of soil several feet high). We were informed that March to June is the breeding season, that the rabbits can have up to three different litters, and that the average life span of the rabbit is two to three years. The second study involves implanting chips and placing collars on juveniles to track movement. Most movement seems to occur between 3 to 6 weeks of age, and the researchers did mention that the natal burrows are often covered up and difficult to find. The researchers are also examining population genetics to see how groups are connected and related. Researchers note the preferred soil and vegetation pygmy rabbits require, and intact stands of sage are very important. Generally, pygmy rabbits burrow in loamy soils deeper than 20 inches and soil composition needs to be able to support a burrow system with numerous entrances, but also must be soft enough for digging. In the future, pygmy rabbits may be listed as an Endangered Species, and the researchers for the BLM are in the process of establishing baseline information in order to facilitate management decisions.

A question was asked about sage grouse viability, and indeed, with the many leks in the area, noise disturbance was identified as a potential problem. It was pointed out

that the BLM wants to maintain and enhance sage grouse habitat, especially late brood habitat.

RAC members then followed Scott Feldhausen across the valley up the Big Timber Creek drainage. Big Timber Creek does not currently reconnect to the Lemhi River; water is channeled off into agricultural fields leaving the lower one-half mile of the creek parched. The BLM is working with landowners in the area to try and rectify the situation, but westerners have long been suspicious of “government help”, and this is no exception. While many people recognize the need for instream flow requirements in Idaho, it is a complicated issue with lots of baggage, and not much progress has occurred.

We looked at two diversion dams on Big Timber Creek, and it is these types of diversions, which frequently de-water entire stream segments, that are at the root of much controversy in the west. Repeated studies have shown that thousands of salmon smolt die every year after being swept into these diversions. Even though the water rights are held by private landowners, the environmental group Western Watersheds has sued the BLM, claiming that the agency should intervene and conduct consultation on these diversions in accordance with the Endangered Species Act. BLM officials maintain that they can not direct water flows associated with Carey Land Act (1879)/ pre-FLPMA activities, and the BLM is not obligated by law (currently) to consult on these types of water diversions (diversions held in private). But Western Watersheds disagrees and claims that the BLM must consult on grandfathered activities (i.e., activities that took place even before the BLM was in existence), and they also claim since the BLM decided they will not consult on pre-FLPMA issues, that decision constitutes in and of itself a Federal activity, therefore consultation must occur. RAC members agreed that if the BLM is forced to become the water lord for the west that the financial and emotion burden would overwhelm most BLM employees who have worked hard (especially in rural areas of the west) to gain the trust of ranchers and farmers. It is this trust and a spirit of cooperation (not so much with the agency itself, but with the “people” who represent them on a daily basis) that will eventually allow for stream restoration, and the BLM is waiting for the results of six test cases that pertain to this issue. Again, the BLM does not envision itself as engaged in the “takings of private land”, but in the management of public land.

At the end of the meeting, discussion ensued, and we were asked, what can an advisory group do to help?

- 1) OHV Management: need help with closing roads, managing conservation, dealing with public conflict (education a key issue on this one).
- 2) Diversion Dams. If the court rules that BLM has discretion, then BLM is in a world of hurt, it makes them water lords, not land managers.

How can RACs help? How can we prioritize our efforts? The OHV and noxious weed issues need to go before the public, but first the public needs to be educated as to the seriousness of these issues.

The Sate Sage Grouse Strategy Plan is pending, and RAC members were asked to review the document to determine if:

- 1) Unfunded mandates are stipulated for the BLM
- 2) Conflicts and inconsistencies within other working group plans occur
- 3) Onerous tasks that just do not make sense given budget constraints exist within the document